

MASTERPIECES
IN COLOUR
EDITED BY - -
T LEMAN HARE

CONSTABLE

1776—1837

PLATE I —THE VALLEY FARM National Gallery
(Frontispiece).

In "The Valley Farm" exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1835, two years before his death, Constable returned to the scenes of his boyhood to Willy Lott's house on the banks of the Stour. His hand and eye have lost something of their grip and freshness, but his purpose is as firm as ever. "I have preserved God Almighty's day light," he wrote "which is enjoyed by all mankind, excepting only the lovers of old dirty canvas perished pictures at a thousand guineas each cart grease, tar, and snuff of candle. The old Adam, you perceive, was still strong in him.

CONSTABLE

BY C. LEWIS HIND

ILLUSTRATED WITH EIGHT
REPRODUCTIONS IN COLOUR.



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CHAPTER I

THE YEAR 1824

JOHAN CONSTABLE was forty-eight years of age in 1824, a memorable year in the history of landscape painting. A date to be remembered is 1824, for in that year Constable's "Hay Wain" was hung in the French Salon. That picture, which is now in

the National Gallery, marked an epoch in landscape art.

Reams have been written about the influence of "The Hay Wain" upon French art, by critics who are all for Constable, by critics who are complimentary but temperate; and by critics who are lukewarm and almost resentful of the place claimed for Constable as protagonist of nineteenth century landscape art. A guerilla critical warfare has also raged around the influence of Turner. Constable and Turner! Most modern landscape painters have, at one time or another, learnt from these two great pioneers. Turner is more potent to-day, but his influence took longer to assert itself. It was not until 1870 that Monet visited London to be dazzled by the range and splendour of Turner at the National Gallery. Forty-six years had passed since "The Hay Wain" was exhibited at the Salon. In that half-century the Barbizon School, those great men of 1830, Corot, Rousseau, Millet, Daubigny, Troyon, Diaz, and the rest had come to fruition. Constable has been claimed as their parent. Thoré, the French critic, who wrote under the name of G. W. Bürger, affirms that Constable was the *point de depart* of the Barbizon School; but Albert Wolff, another eminent French critic,

PLATE II —THE HAY WAIN National Gallery

Painted in 1821, exhibited in the French Salon in 1824, "The Hay Wain," with two other smaller works, which had been purchased from Constable by a French connoisseur, aroused extraordinary interest in Paris and had a potent influence on French landscape art. So impressed was Delacroix with the naturalness, the freshness and the brightness of Constable's pictures at the 1824 Salon, that he completely repainted his "Massacre of Scio" in the four days that intervened before the opening of the exhibition.

was not of that opinion. Thoré, writing in 1863, also said that although Constable had stimulated in France a school of painting unrivalled in the modern world, he had had no influence in his own country, a far too sweeping statement.

The truth about Constable's influence on French art would seem to be midway between the opinions of Thoré and Wolff. That Constable's exhibits at the Salon of 1824, which included two smaller landscapes besides "The Hay Wain," did arouse extraordinary interest, and did have a potent influence on French landscape art, there is no shadow of doubt. So impressed was Delacroix with the naturalness, the freshness, and the brightness of Constable's pictures at the 1824 Salon, that, after studying them, he completely repainted his "Massacre of Scio" in the four days that intervened before the opening of the exhibition; and the following year Delacroix visited London eager to see more of Constable's work. There is also the testimony of William Brockedon, who, on his return from the Salon, wrote thus to the painter of "The Hay Wain." The text of the letter is printed in C. R. Leslie's *Memoirs of the Life of Constable*, a mine of information in which all writers on John Con-

stable, whom de Goncourt called "*le grand, le grandissime maître*," must delve.

"My dear Constable," wrote William Brockedon, "You will find in the enclosed some remarks upon your pictures at Paris. I returned last night and brought this with me. The French have been forcibly struck by them, and they have created a division in the school of the landscape painters of France. You are accused of carelessness by those who acknowledge the truth of your effect; and the freshness of your pictures has taught them that though your means may not be essential, your end must be to produce an imitation of Nature, and the next Exhibition in Paris will teem with your imitators, or the school of Nature *versus* the school of Birmingham. I saw one man draw another to your pictures with this expression—'Look at these landscapes by an Englishman; the ground appears to be covered with dew.'"

Note these passages: *They have created a division in the school of the landscape painters of France—Paris will teem with your imitators—The ground appears to be covered with dew.*

Constable received the gratifying news very quietly. Writing to Fisher from Charlotte Street, Fitzroy Square, on 17th December 1824, he

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remarked—"My Paris affairs go on very well. Though the Director, the Count Forbin, ~~gay~~ my pictures very respectable situations in the Louvre in the first instance, yet on being exhibited a few weeks, they advanced in reputation, and were removed from their original situations to a post of honour, two principal places in the principal room. I am much indebted to the artists for their alarum in my favour; but I must do justice to the Count who is no artist I believe, and thought that as the colours are rough they should be seen at distance. They found the mistake, and now acknowledge the richness of texture, and attention to the surface of things. They are struck with their vivacity and freshness, things unknown to their own pictures. The truth is, they study (and they are very laborious students) pictures only, and as Northcote says, 'They know as little of Nature as a hackney-coach horse does of a pasture' . . . However, it is certain they have made a stir, and set the students in landscape to thinking."

Note the passages: *They are struck with their vivacity and freshness—The truth is they study pictures only.*

I have quoted these letters at length, because they are first-hand authorities, and because they

state, with simple directness, the effect of Constable's pictures at the Salon of 1824. The two smaller works that accompanied "The Hay Wain" we may disregard for the moment, and ask what is there in "The Hay Wain" that it should have so startled the French painting world, and that it should have marked an epoch in the history of landscape art. Stand before "The Hay Wain" in the National Gallery and ask yourself that question. If you are honest, you will admit, perhaps only to yourself, that "The Hay Wain" looks a little old-fashioned. And you will also admit that the full-sized sketch for "The Hay Wain," which you have surely noticed hanging in the Constable room at the Victoria and Albert Museum, pleases you better on account of its greater brilliance, vigour, and impulse. The finished picture, though very powerful, seems a little stolid, a little laboured, as if the painter had left nothing to "happy accident" but had worked with John Bull conscientiousness over every inch of the canvas. You have in the last decade or two seen so many landscapes—pearly, atmospheric, spacious, vivid and vibrating with sunshine, that this "Hay Wain" by honest John, this English pastoral with the great sky, the shimmering water, and the leaves carefully accented with

colour to represent the flickers of light, does not astonish you. Perhaps you pass it by without a pause, without even a cursory examination. But remember this is 1909, and "The Hay Wain" made its sensation in 1824. In those eighty-five years landscape painting has progressed at a faster rate than in all the preceding centuries. In 1824 "The Hay Wain" was a fresh vision, very new and arresting. Why? Simply because Constable returned to Nature and painted Nature. Again and again has this happened in the history of art from the time of Giotto onwards. The little men falter on, copying one another, "studying pictures only," in Constable's phrase; the public accepts their wooden performances as true art; then the great man arises, often a very simple, straight-thinking, modest man like this John Constable, and the great man does nothing more miraculous than just to use his own eyes; he refuses to be dictated to by others as to what he should see and do, and lo! the world looks at what he has done, and either rejects him altogether (for a time), or says, "Here is a genius." Let us make much of him."

One thing is certain. It was not by taking thought, by planning or scheming, that John Constable made that sensation at the Salon of

1824. It was born in him to be what he became—a painter of Nature. How easy and simple it seems. Everybody paints Nature to-day; but in the early years of last century one had to be a great original to break away from tradition and from academic formulæ, and to paint—just Nature.

The awakening came to John Constable in 1802, when he was twenty-six years of age. In a letter to his friend Dunthorne, Constable wrote from London:

“For the last two years I have been running after pictures and seeking the truth at second hand . . . I shall return to Bergholt, where I shall endeavour to get a pure and unaffected manner of representing the scenes that may employ me. There is little or nothing in the Exhibitions worth looking up to. *There is room for a natural painter.*”

A natural painter he became—the painter of England, of simple rural scenes. At forty-seven years of age he lamented that he had never visited Italy, but the mood passed as quickly as it came, and he cries: “No, but I was born to paint a happier land, my own dear old England.” And from his own dear old England he banished the brown tree. But the droll story of the Brown Tree deserves a new chapter.

CHAPTER II

THE BROWN TREE

A CONSTANT communion with pictures, the tints of which are subdued by time, no doubt tends to unfit the eye for the enjoyment of freshness."

So wrote the wise Leslie in a chapter narrating certain passages of art talk between Constable and Sir George Beaumont, when the painter was visiting the amiable baronet at Cole-Orton. The modern world is a little amused by Sir George Beaumont—collector, connoisseur, and painter—who, in his own ripe person, precisely and accurately exemplified Constable's criticism of certain French artists. "They study (and they are very laborious students) pictures only." Sir George loved art, as he understood the term, and it was not his fault that he could not see eye to eye with the young vision of Constable. Quite content and happy was Sir George; he did not wish to change. Loved art? He had a passion for art. Did he not always carry with

him upon his journeys Claude's picture of "Hagar?" In 1826 he presented "Hagar," which is now catalogued under the title of "Landscape with Figures," to the nation; but he felt so disconsolate without his adored picture that he begged to have it returned to him for his life-time. That was done, and on Sir George's death in 1828 his widow restored "Hagar" to the National Gallery. Study "Hagar," and you have the measure of the art predilections of Sir George Beaumont, collector, connoisseur, painter, patron, and friend of John Constable, and author of the famous question, "Do you find it very difficult to determine where to place your brown tree?"

Constable's answer is recorded. "Not in the least, for I never put such a thing into a picture."

Sir George did. Observing the brown tree sprawling in the formal and academic pictures he prized and copied, he reproduced it laboriously in his own works. Apparently it never occurred to him that those brown trees may once have been green.

"Sir George," says Leslie, "seemed to consider the autumnal tints necessary, at least to some part of a landscape." And Leslie is the authority for two oft-told stories about Gaspar Poussin and about the Cremona fiddle.

PLATE III —THE CORNFIELD, OR COUNTRY LANE.

National Gallery

Painted in 1826, and presented to the National Gallery in 1837 by an association of gentlemen, who purchased it of the painter's executors. A typical work. John Constable was pleased with his Cornfield. Writing of it to Archdeacon Fisher, he said—"It is not neglected in any part, the trees are more than usually studied, well defined as well as the stems, they are shaken by a pleasant and healthful breeze at noon."

Sir George having placed a small landscape by Gaspar Poussin on his easel, close to a picture he was painting, said, "Now, if I can match these tints I am sure to be right."

"But suppose," replied Constable, "Gaspar could rise from his grave, do you think he would know his own picture in its present state? or if he did, should we not find it difficult to persuade him that somebody had not smeared tar or cart grease over its surface, and then wiped it imperfectly off?"

The fiddle story can be told in fewer words. Sir George having recommended the colour of an old Cremona fiddle for the prevailing tone of everything in Nature, Constable answered by laying an old fiddle on the green lawn before the house.

Sir George Beaumont was one of the last of the servile disciples of Claude Lorraine and the Poussins, who conjured their followers into believing that a landscape must be composed in the grand or "classical" manner, and must conform to certain academic rules. Claude's drawings, preserved in the British Museum, proclaim that he could be as frank, delightful, and impulsive as Constable in his sketches; but when Claude constructed a landscape of ruined temples and fatuous biblical or legendary figures,

fame and such small rewards during their lifetime, landscape painting in France was still slumbering in classical swathing-bands. As if frightened out of originality by the horrors of the French Revolution of 1789, the landscape painters of France for thirty years and more remained steeped in the apathy of classicism.

David (1748-1825) dominated the French art world, and no mere landscape painter was able to dispel the heavy tradition that David imposed in historical painting. True there were protestors, original men (there always are), but they were powerless to stem the turgid stream. There was Paul Huet and there was Georges Michel, happy no doubt in their work, but unfortunate in living before their time. Michel, neglected, misunderstood, was excluded from the Salon exhibitions after 1814, on account of his revolutionary tendencies. We note signs of the brown tree obsession in Michel's spacious and simple landscapes, but he painted the environs of Paris, and did not give a thought to theatrical renderings of Plutarch, Theocritus, Ovid, or Virgil.

France was ripe for Constablé at that memorable Salon of 1824, simple, straight-seeing Constable, who painted his Suffolk parish, not the tumbling ruins of Italy, and who showed that

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"the sun shines, that the wind blows, that water wets, and that air and light are everywhere." But Constable's influence on the French painters, although great, must not be overstated. Change was in the air. Herald signs had not been lacking of the rebirth of French landscape painting. The French critics of the Salons had already begun to complain of the stereotyped classical ruins and brown-tree landscapes; they announced that they were weary of "malarious lakes, desolate wastes, and terrible cliffs." Joyfully they welcomed in the Salon of 1822 the brilliant water-colours of Bonington, Copley Fielding, and other Englishmen, and then came 1824 with Constable showing that the bright, fresh colours were also possible in oil, and that a fine picture could be made out of an "unpicturesque locality," a lock, a cottage, a hay-wain, a cornfield, quite as well as from a "Plague among the Philistines at Ashdod," or an "Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba."

As has been already explained, Constable did not dream of the success and fame that was in store for him in Paris. "The Hay Wain" was painted in 1821; he was then forty-five, and as will be seen from the following letter written in 1822, he had not found art remunerative.

"I have some nibbles at my large picture of

'The Hay Wain' in the British Gallery. I have an offer of seventy pounds without the frame to form part of an exhibition in Paris. I hardly know what to do. It might promote my fame and procure me commissions, but it is the property of my family; though I want money dreadfully; and, on this subject, I must beg a great favour of you, indeed, I can do it of no other person. The loan of twenty pounds or thirty pounds would be of the greatest use to me at this time, as painting these large pictures has much impoverished me."

In 1824 the nibble became a bite. "The Hay Wain" with the two other pictures was sold "to a Frenchman" for two hundred and fifty pounds. The Frenchman's object was to make a show of them in Paris. He did so to some purpose. And it is odd to note that the name of this farseeing Frenchman has never been disclosed.

Above "The Hay Wain" in the National Gallery hangs James Ward's fine picture called "View of Harlech Castle and surrounding landscape." That is the official title, but I suggest that the title should be, "The End of the Brown Tree." You will observe that the brown tree has been cut down and is being hurried away in a cart drawn by four grey horses. I do not accuse the Director of the National Gallery of joking;

but I cannot think it was altogether without intention that, in the rehanging of the room, James Ward's allegory of the end of the Brown Tree should have been hung above Constable's "Hay Wain," the pioneer picture of the new movement.

CHAPTER III

HIS LIFE

CONSTABLE had a happy, uneventful life and a quiet death. A happy life? Yes.

For the loss of friends and the depression of spirits that clouded his closing years are events that happen to not a few who have lived the major portion of their lives pleasantly and successfully. Practical, level-headed, industrious, there is no hint of the aberrations or eccentricities of genius in the orderly and fruitful sixty-one years of his existence, which began in 1776, and ended in 1837.

Probably the severest blow in his life was the death of his wife in 1828, leaving him with seven children. It came, almost without warning, the year after the family had settled so contentedly in Well Walk, Hampstead.

"This house," he wrote, "is to my wife's heart's content; it is situated on an eminence at the back of the spot in which you saw us, and our little drawing-room commands a view unsur-

PLATE IV.—FLATFORD MILL ON THE RIVER STOUR.

National Gallery

Painted in 1817 Constable was then forty-one, a somewhat mature age for a man to produce what may fairly be called his first important work. It is a picture of England—ripe, lush, carefully composed, carefully executed, but fresh as are the meadows on the banks of the Stour, and the sky, across which the large clouds are drifting, is sunny.



passed in Europe, from Westminster Abbey to Gravesend. The dome of St Paul's in the air seems to realise Michael Angelo's words on seeing the Pantheon; 'I will build such a thing in the sky.'" After his wife's death Constable returned to his former residence in Charlotte Street, Fitzroy Square; but he retained Well Walk, and often sojourned there.

Probably the greatest surprise, and certainly one of the most comforting episodes of his life, was the receipt of a legacy of twenty thousand pounds on the death of his wife's father, which elicited the remark that now he could "stand before a six-foot canvas with a mind at ease, thank God!"

Constable developed slowly as a painter, but having once found himself he strode steadily onward, knowing exactly what he meant to do, turning neither to the right nor to the left, indifferent to tradition, schools, and influences. Consequently the earlier years of his life, when he was breaking away from tradition and beginning to see things with his own eyes are the more interesting. He was born at East Bergholt in Suffolk on 11th June 1776, the second son of Golding Constable, owner of water and wind mills. At the Dedham Grammar School he was renowned for his penmanship, and before he left

school, at seventeen years of age, he had already shown a strong inclination towards painting. In this he was encouraged by his friend John Dunthorne, plumber and glazier, a man of parts, who devoted his leisure time to landscape painting.

Fate was complaisant to Constable. Born in an opulent and wooded quarter of Suffolk, on a spot overlooking the fertile valley of the Stour, with a friend close at hand who loved Nature and painted her for pleasure not for profit, can we wonder that, later in life, Constable wrote enthusiastically and gratefully of "the scenes of my boyhood which made me a painter." A painter he was from the beginning, for his father's proposal that he should take Orders was never really seriously entertained, and the year that he spent as a miller was surely of more service to him as a student of Nature than if he had spent the period as a student in an art school. As a miller, the "handsome miller" he was called, he learnt at first hand the ways of winds, clouds, and storms; in an art school he would have learned how his predecessors had decided that antique statues should be drawn and "shaded." Yes; everything conspired to make John Constable "a natural painter." The art schools would serve him later, but that year as a miller

watching the skies, noting the winds, observing the growth of crops, and the demeanour of trees, was the foundation of his originality. He was but sixteen—that impressionable period when everything is new, and the eyes of body and soul absorb and retain. In that fresh and impulsive sketch called “Spring,” now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, he painted, later in life, one of the mills in which he worked, upon the timbers of which he had carved the words “John Constable, 1792.” In the second edition of his “Life,” published in 1845, Leslie says that the name and date, neatly carved with a penknife, “still remain.” Leslie also prints Constable’s description of this “Spring” sketch which was engraved by David Lucas.

“It may perhaps give some idea of one of those bright silvery days in the spring, when at noon large garish clouds surcharged with hail or sleet sweep with their broad shadows the fields, woods, and hills; and by their depths enhance the value of the vivid greens and yellows so peculiar to the season. The *natural history*, if the expression may be used, of the skies, which are so particularly marked in the hail squalls at this time of the year, is this. . . .” Then follows a lengthy and intimate study of *the natural history* of the skies, showing what stores of knowledge

he had amassed during the year he worked as a miller. Is it exaggeration to describe that year as the most important of his life. It gave him the independent outlook, the rough intimacy with fields and hedgerows under the influences of light and weather, that new-old knowledge which so astonished the French artists at the Salon of 1824. Constable began with the skies of Nature, he went on to study the skies of Claude, Ruysdael, and other masters; but he returned to the skies and pastures of Nature, never to leave them again.

Here is a further episode of Constable's youth before he visited London, another example of the luck, there is no other word for it, that attended his art beginnings. The Dowager Lady Beaumont lived at Dedham, where Golding Constable owned a water-mill, and as the families were friendly, Constable early made the acquaintance of her son, Sir George Beaumont, who was twenty-three years his senior. He had already approved of some copies made by the youth in pen and ink after Dorigny's engravings of the cartoons of Raphael, and he had showed him the "Hagar" by Claude, already mentioned, which Sir George always carried about with him when he travelled. What was still more important, he displayed before his protégé thirty water-colours by Girtin.

PLATE V.—DEDHAM MILL. Victoria and Albert Museum.

Painted in 1820, three years after "Flatford Mill." * Constable's father was the owner of the watermills at Flatford and Dedham. Many years before the date of this picture, Constable, writing of a landscape of Dedham by an acquaintance, said—"It is very well painted, and there is plenty of light *without any light at all*" In "Dedham Mill," he progresses in his purpose to infuse true Light into his pictures.



The Claude and the array of Girtins produced an enormous impression upon young Constable. In Claude he made acquaintance with an old master, who had been the first to paint pure landscape in the approved grand or classical manner; in Girtin was revealed to him the harbinger of a new epoch in landscape painting, the young Girtin, friend and fellow-student of Turner, who died in 1802 at the age of twenty-seven, and of whom Turner said—"Had Girtin lived, I should have starved."

In 1795 Constable made a tentative visit to London, "for the purpose of ascertaining what might be his chance of success as a painter." He carried with him a letter to Joseph Farrington, pupil of Richard Wilson, who predicted that "his style of landscape would one day form a distinct feature in the art." Constable also made the acquaintance of John Thomas Smith, the engraver, known as "Antiquity Smith," who gave him the following excellent advice, which shows that the revolt against the academic landscape had already begun in England:

"Do not," said "Antiquity Smith," "set about inventing figures for a landscape taken from Nature; for you cannot remain an hour in any spot, however solitary, without the appearance of some living thing that will in all probability

shall endeavour to get a pure and unaffected manner of representing the scenes that may employ me . . . *There is room for a natural painter.* The great vice of the day is *bravura*, an attempt to do something beyond the truth."

Constable had now thirty-five years of life before him, through which he worked unwearingly, joyfully, to become a natural painter. Henceforth he was the interpreter of English "cultivated scenery"—pastures and the skies, trees and cottages, the farm-hand, the farm-waggon, the farm-horse, the fugitive rain and the wind that passes. Mountains, the sea, the piled up majestic picturesqueness of Nature did not attract him. In brain, heart, and vision he was essential pastoral England, and never did he better express his innermost feeling than when he wrote:

"I love every stile and stump and lane in the village; as long as I am able to hold a brush, I shall never cease to paint them."

The life of a painter is not usually exciting, and Constable's life was no exception. Here are a few dates. In 1802, at the age of twenty-six, he exhibited his first picture, under the unambitious title "A Landscape," at the Royal Academy; in 1816, at forty, he married; in 1819, at forty-three, he was elected A.R.A.; in 1824, his

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"Hay Wain" was exhibited at the Salon, his wife died; in 1829, at fifty-three, he was elected R.A., and in 1837 he died. The end was sudden. He had been at work during the day on his last picture of "Arundel Mill and Castle," and although his friends noticed that he was not looking well, he was able to go out that evening on an errand connected with the Artists' Benevolent Fund. He retired to bed about nine o'clock, read as was his custom, and when the servant removed the candle by which he had been reading, he was asleep. Later he awoke in great pain, and died within an hour. The post-mortem revealed no indications of disease, and the extreme pain, says Leslie, from which Constable suffered and died could only be traced to indigestion. The vault in the south-east corner of the churchyard at Hampstead where his wife had been buried, and from the shock of whose death he never quite recovered, was opened, and he was laid by her side.

His art was sane and healthy, but his letters show that during the latter part of his life he suffered from depression and morbid fancies.

"All my indispositions," he wrote to Fisher, "have their source in my mind. It is when I am restless and unhappy that I become susceptible of cold, damp, heats, and such nonsense." And,

work there is a line giving the "Places Visited" by Constable during the year. These bare records are like so many windows opening to the country places which Constable loved, where he spent joyous, enthusiastic days; for Constable was never so happy as when he stood with brushes and palette face to face with Nature. Turner was a world traveller—the world of Europe. Constable was a home traveller—the homely stiles, stumps, and lanes of the village. What a vista the following mere record of the Places Visited in 1823 gives: London, Southgate, Suffolk, Salisbury, Gillingham, Sherbourne, Fonthill, Cole-Orton. Can you not see him drawing from each place fresh and dewy inspiration? Not "truth at second-hand": truth direct from the source. And does not the heart respond to Constable's generous enthusiasm for his great contemporary. Here is his testimony to Turner's contributions to the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1828:

"Turner has some golden visions, glorious and beautiful. They are only visions, but still, they are art, and one could live and die with such pictures."

PLATE VI.—A COUNTRY LANE. National Gallery.

This sketch probably served as the motive for the picture of "The Cornfield." The sobriety of the work places it in a category between the careful construction of the Exhibition pictures and the impetuosity of most of the sketches.



CHAPTER IV

HIS SKETCHES

CONSTABLE exhibited one-hundred and four works at the Royal Academy. In addition to these and other paintings, he produced many brilliant sketches and a number of drawings. Like Turner, his achievements may be exhaustively studied in public Exhibitions in London, and as with Turner, the difficulty is where to begin. At the National Gallery there is a wall composed, with one exception, entirely of his works; the Victoria and Albert Museum contains a room, or rather a hall of his pictures, sketches, and studies, and he is also represented at the Tate and Diploma Galleries. Some of the examples were bequeathed to the nation by his last surviving daughter, Miss Isabel Constable, in 1888. Two years later Henry Vaughan bequeathed a number of works, including "The Hay Wain."

The casual visitor finds little emotional excitement, and no literary interest in these honest interpretations of English scenery.

Constable was never dramatic ("The Opening of Waterloo Bridge" may be counted an exception) or idealistic like Turner. From a scenic point of view, "The Hay Wain" is dull compared with "Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus," and knowledge of art history is not so widely diffused as to give to "The Hay Wain" the interest it should command as a pioneer picture in modern landscape. Constable does not thrill. Roast beef does not thrill, but it is wholesome and life-communicating. Constable was a prosaic man of genius. Once he said that "painting is another word for feeling," but he also made that most characteristic retort to Blake, who, when looking through one of Constable's sketch-books, exclaimed on seeing a drawing of fir-trees on Hampstead Heath—"Why, this is not drawing, but inspiration." To which Constable quietly replied—"I meant it for drawing."

Constable never desired to thrill; his ambition was merely to be a natural painter, and he would probably not have been in the least distressed at the episode related by Mr Sturge Henderson in his biography. An elegant and attractive American woman after examining "The Glebe Farm" in the National Gallery, remarked to her son, a typical undergraduate: "Does this thrill you?" "Not the least in the world," replied the

son, and they passed on. No doubt these cultured moderns desired in a painting the "beauty touched with strangeness," that Botticelli and Piero della Francesca offer: there is no place in such æsthetic lives for the familiarity touched with honesty of John Constable. To-day his innovations—his attempts to represent the vibration of light, his spots and splashes of colour to counterfeit the sun glitter, his touches and scrapings laid on with the palette knife to obtain force and brightness—have become a commonplace.

Constable, being a pioneer, was accustomed to misunderstanding and also to badinage. His breezy and showery effects, blowing wind, rustling grasses, waving trees, and wet rain, were occasionally the subjects of banter from his fellow Academicians and others. Fuseli, Professor of Painting, a bad artist, but a good joker, was once seen to open his umbrella as he entered the Exhibition.

"What are you doing with your umbrella up?" asked a friend.

"Oh," replied Fuseli, "I am going to look at Mr Constable's pictures!"

That was really a great compliment, and I may cap the story by quoting the brief, bald, criticism of Sir William Beechy on Constable's "Salisbury from the Meadows."

had it depended for existence entirely upon his sketches; but, speaking for myself, it is to his sketches that I go for joy. Verily this student of Nature, who disliked autumn and loved spring; who painted summer, "its breezes, its heat, its heavy colouring," its gusts of winds, its sudden storms; verily he lives in our hearts wherever our eyes meet his sketches. They induce, they compel one to linger in such places as the dark staircase of the Diploma Gallery, in Burlington House, the walls of which sing out with two groups of his sketches, significant moments seen in Nature. That beach and sea; the rain-storm streaming down the canvas; those floating clouds, only the clouds and the sky visible; that boat with the red sail labouring in the heavy water—they are essential Constable. And what an object lesson in the making of a landscape painter is provided by the hall of drawings, pictures, and sketches at the Victoria and Albert Museum. They are a standing refutation of Ruskin's words—"I have never seen any work of his in which there were signs of his being able to draw, and hence the most necessary details are painted by him insufficiently." Constable was not an inspired draughtsman; but that he worked hard at drawing, and that he achieved considerable mastery with his pencil is abundantly

testified by the many examples at South Kensington, notably, "The Study of Trees at Hampstead," the "Windsor Castle from the River," the "Cart and Horses," and above all the magnificent and minute "Stem of an Elm Tree," none of which, as has already been noted, Ruskin had ever seen. These are all interesting, almost meticulously conscientious, but for John Constable in more daring mood, carried away by the riot of the scene, we must turn to such sketches as the chaotic cloud forms of "Weymouth Bay," and the splashy, opulent splendour of the oil sketch called "View on the Stour." Or to the sketches that emerge, modestly but clamantly, from the large works on the wall devoted to his achievement at the National Gallery, which contains no fewer than twenty-two examples by Constable. One of them, "A Country Lane," illustrated in these pages, served as a motive for his picture of "The Cornfield." The sobriety and somewhat heavy handling of this oil sketch places it in a category between the careful construction of the Exhibition pictures, and the impetuosity of most of the sketches. But the atmospheric "Salisbury" that hangs below, to the left of "A Country Lane," which is a preliminary study without the rainbow for the picture of "Salisbury from the Meadows," has all the

in this solitary communion with Nature that Constable showed the originality of his genius. How thorough he was. He was not content to note only what his eyes saw, but he also observed and recorded the time of day and the direction of the wind.

"Twenty of Constable's studies of skies made during this season (1822) are in my possession," says Leslie, "and there is but one among them in which a vestige of landscape is introduced. They are painted in oil, on large sheets of thick paper, and all dated, with the time of day, the direction of the wind, and other memoranda on their backs. On one, for instance, is written:

'Fifth of September 1822. Ten o'clock morning, looking south-east, brisk wind at west. Very bright and fresh, grey clouds running fast over a yellow bed, about half-way in the sky.'

That is the real Constable speaking, the Constable who had "found himself." But we are never wholly emancipated from tradition, and knowing the difficulties of his craft he retained his admiration for the great ones among his predecessors. In 1824, he wrote: "I looked into Angerstein's the other day; how paramount is Claude . . ."

Maybe. But Claude had to be left alone. Constable knew that in his heart, and, as he

advanced in wisdom, art at second-hand held him less and less, and art at first hand, which is Nature, more and more. He learnt to rely upon his eyes and the cunning of his hand. And when he "thanked Heaven he had no imagination," there was more in that utterance than appears on the surface.

CHAPTER V

HIS PICTURES

IN one of his letters, dated 1799, Constable refers to "a sweet little picture by Jacob Ruysdael I am copying." He was then twenty-three years of age, a devoted admirer and student of his predecessors in landscape, and able, strange as it may seem to us, to call a Ruysdael sweet. In the style of the old masters he continued working until he was nearly forty, learning from them how to construct a picture, and "acquiring execution" as he expressed it. A methodical man was John Constable, a builder who spared no trouble to make his foundations sound; but during those years of spade work in his voluntary apprenticeship, he never disregarded his determination to become a natural painter. It was his custom to study and copy the old masters during his sojourn in London, but to paint in his own original way, directly from Nature and in the open air, when in the country. An early result of "being himself" during holiday

time was the "Dedham Vale" oil sketch of 1802, now at South Kensington, a careful, reposeful picture with trees rising formally at the right, and the church tower visible just beyond the winding river. He utilised this sketch for the large picture exhibited, under the same title, in 1828. The influence of other painters such as the Dutch landscape men, Gainsborough and Girtin, may be traced in many of his pictures produced in the opening years of the nineteenth century when he was "acquiring the execution" on which he based his originality. He also painted portraits; indeed at one time he proposed to live by portrait painting. During 1807 and the next few years he produced several, notably Mr Charles Lloyd of Birmingham and his wife, which Mr C. J. Holmes describes as "amateurish and uncertain in drawing and execution." But there was nothing amateurish or uncertain about the "Portrait of a Boy," which I have lately seen, a ruddy country boy, clad in pretty town-like clothes, an honest, direct, rich piece of work, without a hint of affectation, just the vision of the eye set down straightforwardly. And the fox-gloves that stand growing by the boy's right hand are painted as honestly as the striped pantaloons that this open-air boy wears. Just the kind of portrait that John Constable would have painted.

He also produced two altarpieces—in 1804, a "Christ Blessing Little Children" at Brantham Church, Suffolk; and in 1809, a "Christ Blessing the Elements" at Nayland Church.

Eight years later, in 1817, he painted "Flatford Mill on the Stour," No. 1273 in the National Gallery, which forms one of our illustrations. Constable was then forty-one, a somewhat mature age for a man to produce what may fairly be called his first important picture. But all his past life had been a preparation for this photographic, pleasant transcript of English scenery. *Nothing is left to the imagination, everything is stated*, every inch of canvas is painted with equal force, yet what an advance it is upon most of the classical landscapes then in vogue. It is a picture of England, ripe, lush, carefully composed, carefully executed, but fresh as are the meadows on the banks of the Stour; and the sky across which the large clouds are drifting is sunny. This picture was bought in at the Constable sale, held the year after his death, in 1838, for the very modest sum of thirty-three guineas.

"The White Horse," called also "A Scene on the River Stour," exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1819, which is now in the possession of Mr Pierpont Morgan, was one of Constable's early successes. It attracted "more attention

than anything he had before exhibited," and was bought for one hundred guineas, "exclusive of the frame," by Archdeacon Fisher, who wrote on 27th April:—"The White Horse' has arrived; it is hung on a level with the eye, the frame resting on the ogee moulding in a western side light, right for the light in the picture. It looks magnificently." "The White Horse" realised one hundred and fifty guineas at the Constable sale, and in 1894, fifty-six years later, was bought by Messrs Agnew for six thousand two hundred guineas.

With "The White Horse" Constable also sent to the British Gallery a picture called "The Mill," which is supposed to be identical with the "Dedham Mill, Essex," at the Victoria and Albert Museum. 1819 was a successful year for Constable, a golden year. He was summoned to Bergholt to receive the four thousand pounds he had inherited from his father; in this year Mrs Constable also inherited four thousand pounds; and he was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy. It was in this year while at Bergholt that he wrote to his wife from a grateful and overflowing heart a letter of which the following is an extract—"Everything seems full of blossom of some kind, and at every step I take, and on whatever subject I turn my

eyes, that sublime expression of the Scriptures, 'I am the resurrection and the life,' seems as if uttered near me." There spoke the true landscape painter, the man of deep feeling, conscious that in his painting he was interpreting God's handiwork, and expressing in his chosen medium the miracle of growth, the eternal movement of Nature from birth to re-birth. When standing in that hall at the Victoria and Albert Museum devoted to his achievement—growth, growth, growth—from pencil sketch to completed picture, there are moments when those words of his seem uttered near to us.

"Dedham Mill" may look to our spoilt modern eyes a little tame, but detach yourself from the present, drift into harmony with the picture, and you may perhaps invoke the spirit of the dead man who saw temperate beauty in this scene of his boyhood, and who tried to state his love and gratitude laboriously with paint and brushes—poor tools to express the living light and life of Nature.

Two years later, in 1821, at the age of forty-five, he "painted" "The Hay Wain," to which I have referred at length in the opening chapter. Perhaps some day when the re-organisation of the National Collections is complete, it will be found possible to hang the brilliant full-sized

sketch of "The Hay Wain" now at South Kensington alongside the finished picture in the National Gallery. In the rough magnificent sketch you will observe that he had already begun to use the palette-knife freely in putting on the colour, a practice to which he became more and more addicted.

"The Hay Wain" established his fame; but Constable was not the man to sit down under success and repeat his triumphs in one particular method. In the interval between the painting of "The Hay Wain" and its exhibition in Paris, he produced "Salisbury from the Bishop's Garden," now in the South Kensington collection, wherein he attempted to represent the glitter of sunlight by spots of pure pigment which his friends called "Constable's snow." To us, accustomed to modern pictures of sunlight, the "spots and scumbles of pure pigment" in "Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Garden" are hardly noticeable, but in 1823 they were an innovation, although not altogether a new discovery. Pinturicchio, in his frescoes in the library of Siena Cathedral, experimented in pointillism, and you may trace it, too, in some of the pictures by Vermeer of Delft. "Salisbury from the Bishop's Garden" gave Constable considerable trouble. He was ill and his children were ill. "What

PLATE VIII.—SALISBURY. National Gallery

A preliminary study, without the rainbow, for the large picture of "Salisbury from the Meadows," exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1831. It is larger than his usual sketches, but shows no anxiety. The hand following the eye stopped when the vision of the eye was recorded, when all the hurry of the wet glitter of the scene had been stated in broken pigment.

with anxiety, watching, nursing, and my own indisposition, I have not seen the face of my easel since Christmas, and it is not the least of my troubles that the good Bishop's picture is not yet fit to be seen." Later he describes "Salisbury from the Bishop's Garden" as "the most difficult subject in landscape I ever had upon my easel," adding that it "looks uncommonly well," and that "I have not flinched at the windows, buttresses, etc., but I have still kept to my grand organ colour, and have, as usual, made my escape in the evanescence of the Chiaroscuro."

"The Lock," another of his well-known pictures, was purchased from the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1824 by Mr Morrison for "one hundred and fifty guineas, including the frame." The superb oil sketch for "The Lock" was sold at Christie's in 1901 for nineteen hundred guineas. It is an upright picture of sunshine and gusty wind, and represents a lock-keeper opening the gates for the passage of a boat. "My 'Lock' wrote Constable to Fisher, "is liked at the Academy, and indeed it forms a decided feature, and its light cannot be put out, because it is the light of Nature, the mother of all that is valuable in poetry, painting, or anything else where an appeal to the soul is required. . . . But my execution annoys most of them, and all the

scholastic ones. Perhaps the sacrifices I make for lightness and brightness are too great, but these things are the essence of landscape, and my extreme is better than white-lead and oil, and dado painting." Probably no other landscape painter has expressed the intention of his art as clearly in writing as with his brushes. Light! The light of Nature! The mother of all that is valuable in painting! That was Constable's secret—the knowledge of light, a secret that was hidden from the eyes of worthy Sir George Beaumont.

"The Leaping Horse" of 1825, to which reference has already been made, called by some his "grandest painting," reposes in the Diploma Gallery at Burlington House. Several changes were made in the picture after its exhibition at the Royal Academy, which the curious can verify by a study of the full-sized sketch at South Kensington. From this year onward the movement of Nature and the brilliancy of objects in sunlight intrigued him more and more, although his passion for light never reached the white-hot fervour of Turner in his latter years. For Turner the sunrise, a world almost too beautiful and evanescent to be real; for Constable the noonday glow, the still heat haze, seen between cool, dark trees, hovering over a field of ripe corn, as in "The Cornfield," painted when he

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was fifty—a typical Constable. Constable was pleased with "The Cornfield." Writing of it to Fisher he said: "It is not neglected in any part; the trees are more than usually studied, well defined as well as the stems; they are shaken by a pleasant and healthful breeze at noon

'While now a fresher gale
Sweeping with shadowy gusts the fields of corn'

This picture, perhaps the best known and most popular of his works, was presented to the National Gallery in 1837, by an association of gentlemen, who purchased it of the painter's executors. Some of them wished to substitute for this gift the fine "Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows" with the rainbow, of which the "Salisbury," No. 1814, in the National Gallery, is a study, but "the boldness of its execution" we are told "stood in its way," and the "Cornfield" was purchased instead. The association of gentlemen need not have been apprehensive that the "boldness of the execution" of "Salisbury from the Meadows" would have frightened succeeding generations. The Munich Secessionists would call it commonplace, and the most old-fashioned member of the selecting committee of a current Royal Academy Exhibition would see in it only a fine picture, forcibly painted but too insistent on

outdone himself; he seems to paint with tinted steam, so evanescent and so airy."

Constable's last work was "Arundel Mill and Castle," upon which he was engaged on the day of his death, 31st March 1837.

His pictures are familiar to many who have not seen all the originals, through David Lucas's mezzotints. The first series of twenty mezzotints was published in 1833 under the title, "Various Subjects of Landscape, characteristic of English Scenery, principally intended to display the Phenomena of the Chiar'oscuro of Nature." Constable devoted much attention to the enterprise during the remainder of his life, inspired to make it as fine as possible by the example of Claude's "Liber Veritatis" and Turner's "Liber Studiorum." But its "duration, its expense, its hopelessness of remuneration" oppressed him. "It harasses my days and disturbs my rest at nights" he wrote in 1831. Constable took things hardly, very hardly, after his wife's death in 1828.

CHAPTER VI

HIS PERSONALITY AND OPINIONS

THE personality of Constable was not romantic. In writing of him one has no moods of wonderment or bafflement, and the pen is not tempted to flights of wonder or fancy. The life of Turner might inspire a poem; but plain prose is the only vehicle for a consideration of the life of Constable. He was a sane, level-headed man compact of common-sense and practicality, a man of one great, embractive idea: that having studied the science of picture-making from the earlier masters, the landscape painter must learn from Nature and not from the derivative pictures of his contemporaries. Constable pursued that course with the single-heartedness of a man who devotes his life to some great commercial undertaking. Indeed the portraits of Constable might represent a prosperous and cultured banker, especially those of his later years, were it not for the full, observant eye that you feel surveys a wider domain

than Lombard Street. Religious in the true sense, dutiful, humble before the mysteries of things; old-fashioned in the true sense, a lover and a quoter of good poetry and of the Bible, he had on occasion a sharp and shrewd tongue, but the sting was salved by the absolute sincerity of his intention. Leslie devotes considerable space to a record of Constable's opinions and sayings, many of which have been quoted in these pages. Of a certain contemporary he said — "More over-bearing meekness I never met with in any one man." Of his own pictures he said — "They will never be popular, for they have no handling. But I do not see any handling in Nature."

Here is a saying about his art which sums up the whole tendency of his life—"Whatever may be thought of my art, it is my own; and I would rather possess a freehold, though but a cottage, than live in a palace belonging to another." And here is his comment on the unintelligent connoisseurship of his time—"The old rubbish of art, the musty, commonplace, wretched pictures which gentlemen collect, hang up, and display to their friends, may be compared to Shakespeare's—

'Beggary account of empty boxes,
Alligators stuffed,' etc.

Nature is anything but this, either in poetry, painting, or in the fields."

The lectures on Landscape Painting that he delivered at the Royal Institution in Albemarle Street, at the Hampstead Assembly Rooms, and at Worcester were never written, although an abstract of the first was found among his papers. He spoke from brief notes and made much use of a number of copies and engravings affixed to the walls. The notes taken by Leslie and embodied in his *Life of Constable* are the only record we have apart from the abstract of the first lecture. The belittlers of Claude should make a note of Constable's idolatry for him:—"In Claude's landscape all is lovely—all amiable—all is amenity and repose;—the calm sunshine of the heart. He carried landscape, indeed, to perfection, that is, human perfection." Constable selected four works as marking four memorable points in the history of landscape—Titian's "Peter Martyr," Poussin's "Deluge," Rubens' "Rainbow," and Rembrandt's "Mill." In the choice of the Rubens and the Rembrandt everybody must concur. As Constable never visited Italy he can only have known the "Peter Martyr" from engravings. It was destroyed by fire in 1867, but a copy exists at S. Giovanni Paolo in Venice. Constable had the courage of

his opinions, and of all his opinions the most astonishing is his strong disapproval of a national collection of pictures. In 1822 he wrote—"should there be a National Gallery (which is talked of) there will be an end of the art in poor old England, and she will become, in all that relates to painting, as much a nonentity as every other country that has one. The reason is plain; the manufacturers of pictures are then made the criterions of perfection, instead of Nature."

As a lecturer Constable seems to have relied in a great measure on the inspiration of the moment. Leslie also records the charm of a most agreeable voice, although pitched somewhat too low, and the play of his very expressive countenance. His survey of the history of landscape painting closed with an eulogy of Wilson, Gainsborough, Cozens, and Girtin, and I may close with a brief passage, essential Constable, from the lecture delivered at Hampstead on 25th July 1836. "The landscape painter must walk in the fields with a humble mind. No arrogant man was ever permitted to see Nature in all her beauty. If I may be allowed to use a very solemn quotation, I would say most emphatically to the student—'Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth.'"